



The Pandemic Flu

Background

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. A flu pandemic (pan flu) occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which people have little or no immunity, and for which there is no vaccine. The disease spreads easily person-to-person, causes serious illness, and can sweep across the country and around the world in a very short time (www.pandemicflu.gov).

Predicting the impact of the next pan flu is very uncertain. In the best case scenario, the outcome could be nothing more than a bad seasonal flu season. Worst case impacts might lead to another catastrophe on the scale of the 1918 pandemic which had an estimated global mortality of between 30 and 50 million.

The possibility of even a moderate pandemic is a concern because so many people with severe illness could overwhelm available medical care resources. Further projected effects include significant employee absenteeism due to illness, fear of illness exposure while at work, or the need to care for ill family members. As much as 30 to 40% of the workforce could be absent during the height of what may be several pandemic waves. A pandemic may come and go in waves, each of which can last from six to eight weeks.

Planning efforts to address the potential challenges a pandemic could bring are best made well in advance. While daunting in scope, such planning should also help provide protection against other possible disasters.

All local health departments are required to have a pandemic flu plan for the county. The plan is to address pan flu challenges and dynamics and include the following elements:

- Identification of personnel responsible for pan flu planning.
- Identification of essential aging services and means to continue to provide them.
- Identification of training needs for providers' employees.
- Local, regional, and state level sources of official information to follow during an event.
- Plans to communicate with clients.

Once plans are made, it is crucial to test them. After a pan flu test, the plan may require adjustments or adaptation. Public Health encourages all those involved in planning to use the lessons they've already learned during disasters to help plan for other challenges.

Questions/Actions for the Aging Leadership Planning Team:

- Review your local health department pandemic flu plan? Does it incorporate the unique needs of vulnerable adults and their caregivers?
- How has the local aging provider network planned for a disaster such as the pandemic flu? Are local aging providers working with the health department?
- How will providers address significant employee absenteeism? How will employee and volunteer absenteeism affect services?
- What efforts are being taken to inform the aging network about the local health department's pandemic flu plan?
- Is there a role for the Aging Leadership Planning Team to participate in testing the pandemic flu plan, or educating the public about it?
- Are other emergency preparedness efforts taking place in your community that could or should also include planning for a possible pandemic flu?

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- Area Agencies on Aging may wish to add a “Pandemic Influenza” or “Respiratory Communicable Disease” addendum to their existing “All Hazards” plans as a means to minimize impacts of pan flu on North Carolina.
- Are local aging service providers encouraged to develop such a plan in addition to their other disaster preparedness plans?

Best Practices

Triangle J Area Agency on Aging offers an all hazards disaster preparedness toolkit. The toolkit, developed by a graduate intern, offers six mini-lessons about basic emergency preparations and is available for use by anyone, but would be particularly useful to aging service providers, or lay leaders that work with the elderly. The toolkit was designed for flexibility, and users may find one or all of the modules useful. The 6 modules are:

1. It's in the bag (what to put in your own “grab and go” emergency bag).
2. Food and water essentials.
3. Heat, light, and energy essentials.
4. Medications and toiletries essentials.
5. Making a personal plan.
6. Putting it all together – important emergency tips.

Triangle J also offers an extensive list of disaster preparedness information and planning tools on their website at www.tjaaa.org (go to topic index under disasters).

Resources:

1. www.ncpanflu.gov
2. www.pandemicflu.gov
3. Local Health Department (<http://www.ncalhd.org/county.htm>)
4. www.ready.gov
5. Seek “Business Continuity and Recovery Planning” assistance from willing professionals.
6. The Six Emergency Preparedness training modules developed by Triangle J Area Agency on Aging are available at: <ftp://ftp.tjcog.org/pub/aging/tjaaa/> .
7. American Red Cross:
http://www.redcross.org/news/ds/panflu/pdfs/pan_flu_coping_emotional_well-being.pdf
and
<http://www.redcross.org/news/ds/panflu/careforothers.html>

